

UPDATE ON THE WORK OF GREEN SPACES AND THE IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON THE COUNCIL'S PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

Committee name	Environment, Housing and Regeneration Select Committee
Officer reporting	Paul Richards, Green Spaces, Sport and Culture
Papers with report	None
Ward	All

HEADLINES

To provide the Committee with a brief overview of the work of Green Spaces and the impact of Covid 19 on the Council's parks and open spaces.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Committee:

1. Notes the contents of the report.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the Council's parks and open spaces remained clean, open, and safe, providing comfort and emotional wellbeing to thousands of our residents. At a time when much of the vibrancy of the Borough was subdued, and many of the cultural institutions were closed, parks provided all visitors a place for peace, play, and inspiration - a place to be alone or to connect safely with others.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of access to green spaces and the connection with nature in urban areas for the benefit of residents mental health and wellbeing, particularly for people living in deprived areas. We know that more residents have used and enjoyed green spaces than ever before. We know of residents who have explored parts of the Borough that they have never visited before, despite living in the area for a great number of years. Those without access to their own green spaces utilised the parks for recreation and safe socialising.

With the increased number of visitors, the Council has been presented with new challenges such as the quantity of litter, as people dined alfresco, and the increase in dog ownership, and the historic infrastructure of some parks designed in the Victorian period, (some with dedicated site staff.) This influx of visitors has meant we have had to adapt with the resources currently available.

We have increased the capacity of our bins in the busy parks during the summer periods,

alongside the addition of commercial waste units. We also increased the staff deployed to litter rounds to keep the parks clean of litter. We have also seen more volunteers, keen to look after their own environment, get involved with litter picks, which the Council has helped support.

Sport

With several team sports placed on hold during 2020, an increase in those enjoying tennis facilities was observed. Having the ability to book is a key factor for those wishing to use our courts. On several courts, we fitted the ability to book a court via a keypad linked to a website. We are currently working closely with the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) to further improve our tennis facilities, having applied for some of the government's recently communicated funding for tennis. We are also providing a programme of tennis activities to help support and encourage participation.

Once football was permitted to be played, and in a safe and phased approach, we supported clubs by extending the football season throughout 2020. Goals were left in place and pitches were marked out. We have seen an explosion in participation for youth football, with hundreds of young people now playing this sport, from as young as under 5's girls, as well as boys. Working with the Football Association (FA), Football Foundation and the Middlesex FA, we are looking at ways to support clubs needing pitch improvements by seeking funding. Currently, we are working with Explorers, Bessingby Rangers, Ickenham Youth, Ruislip Rangers and Townmead Youth on funding projects.

Recreational cricket is another sport in parks that saw an increase. Groups arrange their own matches without proper wickets or facilities. Acknowledging this, we are working with the English Cricket Board (ECB) in a funding application to provide an artificial wicket and practice nets in both Cowley Recreation Ground and Grassy Meadows.

Lawn Bowlers were also grateful that their facilities were available to play with Covid safeguards put into place. It was clear that social isolation had been a challenge for many, so being able to play bowls and catch up with friends was important.

Having a pleasant and safe environment to explore as a walk and or a run was again important for so many that didn't have access to their own outdoor space, something which has continued as restrictions have eased.

Play is also an important component in our parks. With safety in mind during the lockdowns, play equipment and outdoor gym equipment was fenced off to meet government guidelines. As soon as these restrictions were relaxed, we have ensured our playgrounds are available. The first phase of the three-year rolling replacement has now concluded, and we are designing the next phase. This is based on our independent safety reports, to help inform the list of priority sites for replacement.

Environmental benefits

We know that enhancing Hillingdon's green spaces will have several environmental co-benefits. It would help ameliorate the urban heat island effect (both via tree shading and the cooling effect of water evaporating from plants), enhancing the Borough's resilience to the effects of

climate change and air pollution.

We have partnered with the organisation Trees for Cities, looking at creative ways to increase our tree canopy around those areas of high air pollution. As well as large scale planting in parks and open spaces, we have tried new ways of tree planting on the highway, looking at mass planting of small tree stock, which should have a better survival rate. This has been carried out in Long Lane, with the view to expand to other sites within the Borough. We are still planting trees to replace any that have been lost. Maintaining our existing tree stock is as important as adding more trees, and is something our tree officers are fully engaged in. They are supported by our Principal Landscape Officer regarding trees on new builds, and those proposed on new planning applications.

This year, we are also offering a Tree Sponsorship via Trees for Streets, for residents who so wish to sponsor a tree on the roadside or a park. If they wish to help maintain it in keeping it irrigated, then this is reflected in the cost. We are already seeing a level of interest in this opportunity for a celebration tree.

Increasing biodiversity has been a recent priority, not only within our Countryside and Green Estate, but also in parks and along roadsides. We have piloted a scheme to introduce plants/flowers to support pollinators. These areas have been prepared and sown with a suitable mix. We are keen to see if, through careful management, these plantings will be sustainable in setting their own seed to keep the displays going without further sowing.

In support of this, this year we have also tried managing areas slightly differently, following advice from Plantlife. This is to leave areas long, but to then cut and collect in the late summer. In doing this, you encourage native wildflowers to be present together with the wide fauna that these plants support. Early indications have shown success with wildflowers, including orchids, being counted this summer.

Prevention of flooding is high on our agenda. We have just completed a project supported by volunteers at Hillingdon House Playing Fields, with the introduction of ponds and streams to help control the flow of water entering the river.

We are looking at a scheme for Bessingby Park and working with colleagues regarding the 'Rain Gardens' along the highway to help control runoff during heavy periods of rain. Work in our woods to install 'Leaky Dams', again to slow surface water, have been constructed by the Woodland Officers with assistance from volunteers.

Much is discussed about our green spaces, but our blue spaces are equally as important and a focus for our Conservation and Countryside Officers and the volunteers who help support us in maintaining our water courses.

We are also exploring the reduction of peat within our floral displays and the plants we grow. We also sell peat free compost at the RAGC.

The Council is employing an integrated approach to weed control, through the use of 'smart' technology in identifying chlorophyll and only treating this, and not the wider surface, thereby reducing chemical usage.

We are also trailing electrical equipment such as hedge cutters, blowers etc. currently in the grounds of the Crematorium. Though advanced for the domestic market, there is still a way to go in battery life etc. for the professional market, though annual advancements are taking place, so it will be a matter of time and most of our handheld power tools will be electric.

We pride ourselves on the quality of our parks and have used the Green Flag Award as the standard to aspire to.

Working with the local community we have been successful in the following in, the regional competition London in Bloom:

Gold

- Hillingdon was judged overall winner in the 'Large City' category
- Harmondsworth Village won the 'London Village' category
- Eastcote won the 'large London village' category
- The Friends of Eastcote House Gardens were crowned winners in the 'Our Community' category
- Eastcote House Gardens scooped top place in the 'Park of the Year'
- The Friends of Eastcote House Gardens won overall in the 'Walled Garden' category

Silver Gilt

- Long Meadow in Eastcote won in the 'Large Conservation' category

Other awards

- The Friends of Eastcote House Gardens were marked as outstanding in the 'It's your Neighbourhoods' category
- Lesley Crowcroft, Chair of the Friends of Eastcote House Gardens was given the 'Outstanding Achievement' award.

For the ninth year running, Hillingdon has also retained its title as the UK's greenest Borough, after it was once again awarded the most Green Flags nationally.

The Borough's total number of flags increased by 3, from 60 to 63 (62 of which are maintained by the Council) in October. The new sites added this year are Sipson Meadow (Heathrow Villages ward), Deane Park (South Ruislip ward) and Colham Green Recreation Ground (Brunel ward).

In recognition of the increase in interest in gardening over the past couple of years, we redeveloped the Borough competition Hillingdon in Bloom with entries online and judging via

photographs. This has been successful with more people now taking part, with an increase in first time entries. Our residents are very proud of their gardens and floral displays and keen to show them off.

We have also kept the Autumn Show going with a slightly changed format, but again acknowledging the keenness to grow vegetables and flowers alongside the added motive of a prize in recognition of their efforts.

Whilst it was difficult for people to get out to get their plants, compost and seeds, the RAGC offered an order and delivery service and when restrictions were relaxed, a click and collect service. This was very well received as gardening was something that assisted people during the period of restrictions.

We encouraged allotment plot holders to tend their allotments during 2020, though in a safe manner, with guidance shared. It was felt unfair and not appropriate to then chase those relating to no cultivation, so no non-cultivation notices were issued in 2020.

Our floral displays are always a popular addition to the Borough through the number of hanging baskets and planters. We are exploring peat free compost, better water retention and plant selection. Our plantings have also been extended by the likes of Uxbridge BID, who have funded and arranged the plantings above Uxbridge station and around some old telephone boxes. The plantings on roundabouts are also sponsored to help to help cover the cost of these displays.

In line with the Council's Climate Action Plan, we are continuing to keep our standards across our parks and open spaces under review.

Ruislip Lido

We recognise how important Ruislip Lido was to the health and wellbeing of residents and visitors during the height of the pandemic. To keep visitors and staff safe, we introduced a 'one-way' system around the Lido and during anticipated busier periods, we introduced a limit on the numbers of visitors at any one time to the Lido site and put in place additional staff to help control access, including Covid marshals, manage traffic and enforce parking restrictions to keep roads safe. We are continuing to keep the arrangements for the Ruislip Lido under review.

Implications on related Council policies

A role of the Select Committees is to make recommendations on service changes and improvements to the Cabinet who are responsible for the Council's policy and direction.

How this report benefits Hillingdon residents

None at this stage, pending any findings approved by Cabinet.

Financial Implications

Classification: Public

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There are no financial implications arising from this report.

Legal Implications

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

NIL.